



# Maricopa County Animal Care & Control

## *SELECTING THE RIGHT PET FOR YOU*

### **EVERY PET IS AN INDIVIDUAL**

When you choose a pet, you are choosing a friend who will be with for ten to twenty years — so it should be a carefully made decision, taking many aspects into consideration. Everyone in your household should take part in this process, since you will all be living with your pet.

Every animal is an individual with a unique personality and special characteristics all his own. Their personality will be based on some inherited and some learned traits, and that combination is what makes each individual unique. When we choose our friends, we look for certain characteristics that fit into our lives, traits we share, and attitudes that help us mesh. Physical characteristics may play a part in those choices, but the real "click" comes from those combined traits that are unique to each individual. Before you begin your search for the perfect pet for you, it is best to make some lists to help you in this important process.

### **PHYSICAL TRAITS**

**Size:** Avoid the terms "large" or "small", since such words are vague and can be easily misinterpreted; be specific. Do you want a dog who is no taller than your knee? your ankle? your hip? If your landlord or homeowners' association has a weight restriction for pets, that needs to be part of your list. And if you meet a wonderful pet who isn't full-grown yet, be sure you know what size he'll be as an adult.

**Coat:** Some dogs and cats have high-maintenance coats which require daily brushing, and some will need to be professionally groomed. This grooming is a large part of the responsibility of living with a pet.

**A note about allergies:** If someone in your household is allergic to animals, please be aware that there are no specific breeds of dogs or cats who are absolutely "non-allergenic". (A visit to an allergist will help determine if your allergy is to cats, dogs, OR the grass and dust outdoor animals may carry on their coats if they aren't kept clean.) The length of your pet's coat and how much he sheds have very little to do with how allergic you might be to him. Allergies are usually triggered by dander — the combination of skin flakes and saliva.

### **PERSONALITY TRAITS**

Some types of dogs and cats share general personality traits: retrievers like to have things in their mouths; terriers like to dig; and Siamese-type cats tend to be very talkative. Whether these traits are positive or negative will depend to a great degree on what activities you want to share with your pet.

**Activity levels:** Dogs who have high energy levels — herding types, retriever types, and other active dogs — need to have plenty to do with their bodies and with their minds. The more time they spend doing things with their people, the happier you will all be. If

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you like to walk, run, or play catch, these may be great dogs for you. If you're a couch potato, you'll both be miserable. The same holds true for the more active types of cats, like Siamese and Abyssinians.

**Tolerance levels:** Will this pet share his territory with children under six years old? between six and twelve? Some animals are more tolerant than others of children. Many may be fearful of being surprised, threatened, injured, or having their "stuff" disturbed. Very small dogs are often especially nervous, since they are more vulnerable to rough handling. It's difficult for pets to understand the sounds and uncoordinated movements of young children, and it's hard for those children to understand when the pet says "stop". Older children may be fine in small numbers, but when they congregate their actions are more unpredictable. While many families think they want "a pet for the children," it actually takes a very special combination of parent/child/pet to have a successful relationship.

## **THE RIGHT AGE**

Many people assume that puppies or kittens are the only "right" age for a new pet to be introduced into the family, when in fact an older pet is actually more suitable for many situations. Puppies and kittens are babies. The first six months of life are vital to the development of puppies and kittens and require a lot of time, care and energy. Many households are not able to provide what is needed during this busy period of high-rate learning and growing. Baby animals who are not properly taught and cared for during this time find it difficult to develop the proper social skills.

A pet of **any** age can bond with the people who love and care for him, giving as much to the relationship as he receives in return. If you're looking for a pet with certain personality traits, it's more likely that you'll find

the right companion to fit your lifestyle if the candidate is at least six months old. If you don't have the patience or energy for a "teenager", you should consider an adult dog or cat who is at least one year to eighteen months old. Dogs and cats this age learn quickly, have more coordination and control over their physical functions, and have more predictable natures.

**Time:** Puppies and kittens need more physical and emotional involvement with their people than you can give if you are away from home more than six hours a day. Most adult pets can easily adjust to your schedule. If all of your family members are away from home more than eight hours most days, a dog may not be the appropriate choice for your household, and you might want to consider adopting an adult cat (or two) instead.

**Kids:** If children in your household are under six years old, the pet should be over four months old. Puppies and kittens play roughly, and without careful supervision and training both your child and your pet could have a bad experience with potentially serious consequences. An adult pet is usually past the stage of becoming overly excited, and you can better gauge how hardy and tolerant he'll be toward childish enthusiasm. It's your responsibility, to your pet and to your child, to monitor their interactions.

**Other pets:** It's best to introduce a younger animal to an adult resident pet in your household, but not too young. Your resident cat or dog may respond to a very young kitten or puppy as prey to be hunted. In addition, the older pet may not like the constant bother and play. From four to 14 months old is a good age range to introduce a puppy or kitten to your adult pet.